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THEOLOGY, THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

A Sermon preached at St. Mary's Church
before the University of Oxford
on January 18, 1914

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WILLIAM TEMPLE, M.A.
Headmaster of Repton

Oxford
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"*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches.*"—REV. II. 7.

IF we believe that the course of the world is governed by the Providence of God, we shall expect to find in every new epoch fresh opportunities for the victory of faith. In our own day there are two distinct spheres where our faith is challenged, and at first sight it seems that to accept both challenges at once is almost impossible. The first challenge comes from the whole condition of the world in our time; for it is all in process of remaking. The social order of Europe and America is undergoing transformation; the whole life of the East is breaking into new energy; European influence and the advance of Mohammedanism are co-operating to bring to an end the long slumber of Africa and to awaken none knows what. There is such a chance as perhaps there never was before of leavening the whole lump of the world with the leaven of faith.

Yet in that very moment of opportunity we seem to be paralysed. For the faith as we have received it is itself called in question by the

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advance of knowledge and the expansion of thought. Here, too, we must believe there is a great opportunity. We must claim the right to show how faith in Jesus Christ is the one principle that can give unity to all the chaos of knowledge which has lately been tossed into the human wind. But in doing that we shall find ourselves restating what we had received and, possibly at least, modifying the very substance of our belief. And the Church of England, which gives permission to its representatives to make experiments and initiate adventures for the conquest of thought in the name of Christ, is told, as a result, by one of its most devoted missionary leaders, "that at the present time, having regard to her exceedingly chaotic system of Truth, she is entirely unfit to send missionaries to heathen or Mohammedan lands!" *

It looks at first as if some devil were at work, sapping the strength of the Church in the day of its opportunity. I shall suggest later on another interpretation of the matter; but first I would draw your attention to the fact that we have in the Church of England, and are undoubtedly exposed to serious dangers through having, "an exceedingly chaotic system of Truth." It is even more accurate, perhaps, to say, as has been lately said, that whereas the Churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Rome have erred in matters concerning the faith, "the point about the Church of Canterbury is that it has never pretended to be right." † To that I would only add that it has been right precisely in refusing to make any such pretension. Let us admit that our

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* *Ecclesia Anglicana*, p. 1.
† R. A. Knox. *Naboth's Vineyard*, p. 16.

Reformation settlement rests not on theological conviction, but on compromise dictated by the exigencies of a particular moment in national history. Still, man's blindness is God's opportunity, and it is possible that, in that mere working compromise, God fashioned for Himself a tool that He would use in a time which is upon us now, but of which no human being then dreamt.

The most fundamental question now requiring discussion is that of the nature of theology itself. Is it a Deposit, miraculously placed in the world, which the Church has only to hand on from generation to generation? or is the Deposit of Faith just the vitalizing energy of righteousness—of love towards God and Man—which came into the world in and through Jesus Christ, theology being the progressive attempt to understand this vitalizing energy? If this latter is the truth, as I firmly believe, then there is a peculiar service which, in the Providence of God, can be rendered by a Church which maintains the means of grace as they were known in the undivided Church, which still ministers the same vitalizing energy through the same ministry of Word and Sacrament, but does not claim to possess a final and unalterable intellectual apprehension in which all future ages are to acquiesce. No doubt the Church has never deliberately adopted such a position; it drifted into it; or was it led into it by the Holy Spirit to meet the needs of such a time as this?

There are two perfectly distinct ways of regarding theology. The one presents it as a process of Deduction from unquestioned principles. To those who accept those principles the conclusions are certain; and there are some who seem to hold that they could not preach on any

other basis than this. "If I could not preach the Christian faith in its fulness on a basis of absolute *a priori* certainty I would give up preaching it altogether." But the certainty is purely subjective. In the thirteenth century, when no one in Europe (speaking broadly) questioned the initial principles, this was probably the most effective method of bringing the Church's doctrines before men's minds; but it was never valid proof, for to question those principles made the whole fabric insecure. And those principles are widely questioned now. Whether we accept them or not seems (as far as I can understand one representative of this school) to be a matter of what psychologists call temperament, while Christianity calls it faith.* We are to trust orthodox tradition to determine what we are to believe and common sense to determine what is orthodox tradition.†

I cannot here refrain from quoting my father's saying, that Newman's great mistake lay in looking first for the true Church and then believing what it taught, instead of looking first for the truth, and then serving that Church which taught it most fully.

The deductive method is undoubtedly that of the Schoolmen. But certain reservations must be added. In the first place, as I have said, the initial postulates were then universally granted; so if the deductive reasoning was without flaw, doubt could not find an entrance. The certainty therefore had an appearance of objectivity which it has entirely lost owing to the fact that the believer nowadays perpetually meets with people

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* R. A. Knox. *Some Loose Stones*, pp. 27, 28. The words here occur in another context, but the whole point of view is clear.

† *Ibid*, p. 216.

who do not admit his starting-point. He may be perfectly assured of this starting-point himself, but that assurance is not evidence: it is merely a fact of his personal experience. And so this theological method turns out to rest in the last resort upon a particular type of "religious experience," though it is disposed to treat the appeal to religious experience with contempt.* And the second reservation is this; in making theology deductive the Schoolmen were conforming to the ideal which all science set before itself at that time; they were simply making theology as scientific as they could. The deductive method was everywhere supposed to be the one method of reaching certainty. The intellectual circumstances of the period made it possible to forget the fact that pure Deduction never has a right to its starting-point.

"But," it will be urged, "at any rate Induction never has any right to its conclusion." And that is true if we are thinking of Induction pure and simple. But both Induction and Deduction in their pure forms are products of analysis, which may be useful in debate, but never represent the reality of living thought. All actual thinking proceeds in circles or pendulum-swings. We approach a group of facts; they suggest a theory; in the light of the theory we get a fuller grasp of the facts; this fuller grasp suggests modifications of the theory; and so we proceed until we reach a systematic apprehension of the facts where each fits into its place. In the end we have, not one universal and unquestioned proposition with other propositions deductively established from it, but a whole system—a concrete universal—

* Cf. R. A. Knox, *Some Loose Stones*, pp. 200, 215.

in which each element is guaranteed by all the rest, and all together constitute the whole which determines each: as in a democracy the citizens actually constitute the sovereign which they obey. So Edward Caird used to tell us—"There is no harm in arguing in a circle—if the circle is large enough." It was once a poser to say—"If the elephant stands on the tortoise, on what does the tortoise stand?" But the Law of Gravitation says—"If the elephant stands on the tortoise, the tortoise stands on the elephant."

So, for example, I am content to argue in this way. My upbringing has predisposed me to believe in the promises of Christ; Christ promised to His disciples the guidance of His Spirit; the Church, as the fellowship of His disciples, will therefore probably be right (not "certainly," because the treasure is in earthen vessels); I inquire independently into its decisions, and find that whenever I reach a conclusion at all, it is that the Church was right in relation to the problem before it at the time; this confirms my belief that the Church is the Spirit-bearing Body, and that, in turn, corroborates the influence which trained me to put trust in Christ.

"But this," I shall be told, "gives away the case, for it admits that the whole process starts with a predisposition implanted by early training; and if we track the history back we come to the days of unquestioning acceptance of the whole Catholic doctrine as such. This process of sifting may be gratifying to the individual who indulges in it, but it imperils the vital energy, which all are agreed is the great matter. Thomas Arnold sat loose to Catholic tradition, though he retained the fire of personal devotion; but Matthew Arnold

has little of that fire to show. The sons of men who contributed to *Essays and Reviews* and to *Lux Mundi* are found as colleagues in *Foundations*; in what will their sons collaborate? There is only one way of safety; it is to retain the whole, kernel and husk together, for the kernel will perish if exposed without protection to the storm-blasts of criticism."

But there is a parable on the other side also: a man once bought a basket of fruit, but he came to the conclusion that the basket was not good for food, so he threw it away with the fruit inside it and thus went hungry. Another man found the basket, and because the fruit was good he devoured basket and fruit together, and thus had indigestion. There is no "safety" in merely continuing to hand down a tradition. That, like so many courses recommended in the name of safety, is the deliberate choice of one particular disaster. No doubt this disaster is less complete than that which may overtake an unwise criticism; but the risk of the greater disaster is avoided at the cost of making the greatest achievement impossible.

Some people, indeed, speak as if the Creeds were in the nature of the case unalterable, as if they were objects of faith themselves. But the object of faith is God as it has pleased Him to reveal Himself to man. Those who have tried to live as disciples of Jesus Christ assure us that in Him they have found God even as He told them, so that trust in Him becomes part—the decisive part—of their faith. This experience of trust and its verification in consequent experience is formulated in the Creeds, as certain properties of matter are formulated in the Law of Gravitation. And it is possible, though most improbable, that

further knowledge may lead to modification in either case. But if that Law requires alteration, the physical facts on which it rests will not thereby be altered; if the Creeds require alteration, the facts which they attempt to formulate will still remain and the new formulation will have to take account of them. There is no lack of faith in such a view; rather it rests on the faith that as God the Holy Spirit guided the Church in the past, so He will not fail to guide us now and always.

"But is there, then, no finality?" No, there is not. How should there be finality in the finite's apprehension of the Infinite? The very demand for such finality or for any absolute authority, whether in Church or Bible, superseding the individual conscience, is not far from the essential sin of Pharisaism. Our faith is a continuous adventure, and leads perpetually to new discoveries. Assurance becomes greater with every problem that the Church's doctrine solves and every soul that through it finds rest in God. But there is no finality; and yet there is authority, even Divine authority. We need to learn the great lesson of St. Paul's life, the truth implied in his whole treatment of the Jewish law; that law was divinely instituted, yet its validity was only for a time. Even what God appoints may be changed as new stages are reached in the accomplishment of the Divine purpose. What the doctrinal basis of Church membership should be, the Church must at any given time decide; and though it is not probable that any change will be required, we must always recognize the possibility that change may be required.

"But still," it is urged at last, "you cannot rely on reason alone. Your own beliefs are the

product of reason and faith together, only you choose for yourself just how much 'faith' you will put into the compound."* This objection, however, rests entirely on that sharp antithesis of Deduction and Induction which has already been criticized. Our behaviour here should be exactly analogous with that of all sensible people in the realms of Art and Morals. Let us consider the latter, as being the more universally familiar subject. We are brought up under the influence of certain moral ideals and conventions; these mould our own moral tastes and perceptions; but as we grow up we criticize those ideals and conventions in the light of their own underlying principle so far as we are able to apprehend this—and so we are able to hand down to our successors a fuller and truer conception of moral duty than we received from our predecessors; and they in turn will improve on what we pass on to them. We can by no means exhaust our moral duty merely by "keeping true to ideals which were there all along."† We have to try to find the principle of which each ideal is a consequence, or the system in which it is an element, and correct each ideal in the light of our whole conception of Duty. Or if we believe, as I believe, that the fundamental moral law is already known—"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"—that still requires constant verification and our understanding of it requires constant amplification.

The Catholic theology is, no doubt, a coherent system; it is a genuine concrete universal; it unifies just those facts with which it set out to deal. But since its formulation other facts have

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* Cf. *Ecclesia Anglicana*, pp. 12-14.
† R. A. Knox. *Some Loose Stones*, p. 38.

been brought within men's knowledge, and the question arises whether this system must be modified to enable it to form a part in man's whole knowledge of God's Universe, or whether it can take its place there as it stands. For myself I believe that the modifications will be so slight as to be negligible, and that the old formulæ, and in particular the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, will stand unchanged. But the question has been asked, and only thorough scientific inquiry can answer it.

This does not mean that we are to dispense with all authority, or to seek for God through the study only of those facts which are the subject matter of the natural sciences. We were born children of Christian parents; we were received into the fellowship of the Church at Baptism. That is our starting-point; and it is the starting-point of most Christian people. Some few there are whom God calls directly by inward revelation; and many more who are drawn to the Gospel by the personality of some of Christ's disciples. Thus we acquire our predisposition to believe—from the authority of those whom we love or of those whom we revere or of the inward voice of God. They must be very few who first believe through submission to the authority of the Church as such. It is from the same sources that we derive our habits of Bible-reading, prayer and communion. And there many people stop, and no doubt rightly stop; they have found power by which to live. But if a man feels beyond this the need to understand, or the call to help others who feel that need, he will proceed somewhat as follows. He will try first to understand as fully as he may the formulation of the faith as it has been worked out in previous generations.

He will criticize this in the light of the widest experience of which he can make himself master —whether it be his own or that of others, or that of the whole society of believers as represented in the corporate decisions of the Church; he will try to make by means of it a coherent view of life and of the world, which shall include so far as possible all the knowledge of things spiritual and physical which has so far been allowed to men. As he proceeds, some parts of the whole doctrine of the Church will seem to be more and more indubitably true. As he applies the central beliefs—and particularly the belief that in Christ we see the Father—to the problems of life, he finds those problems simplified and often solved. And so, *because he is convinced of a part, and has seen that the whole is all of one piece*, he will be ready, if the call come, to be ordained as a minister of the Church which upholds the Catholic doctrine as a whole. He will still be ready for modification here and there; still more will he be not only ready but eager to win the same appreciation of the rest of the Creed as he has already won of this article and that; but, *unless some new fact of experience leads him to remould his whole world of thought, he knows that he is right to trust and to preach the Church's creed.* And he has reached that knowledge by the scientific method of experiment and thought. He makes no claim to reach his conclusion by reason without data; the data are no doubt given him as a rule by his Christian environment. But the human mind does not itself create the facts which it studies in physics and chemistry, and there is no desertion of reason for faith when moral and spiritual perceptions are taken as the data instead of perceptions of the bodily senses?

Nor is this method of critical conservatism a new one. It is as old as the New Testament itself. For it seems clear that the author of the Fourth Gospel—(whom I believe to be S. John, the beloved disciple)—deliberately corrected S. Mark with reference to certain dates. And in doctrine, if by that is meant systematic expression, S. Anselm undoubtedly made a great advance upon all previously accepted notions concerning the Atonement, and Dr. Moberly, in my judgement, represents as great an advance upon S. Anselm. And as the individual Christian or the whole Body of the Church thus works out man's understanding of the truth of God, while old formularies will be retained as standards of belief wherever possible for the sake of the associations which gather round them and the latitude of interpretation which their old-world phraseology encourages, there will be all the while perpetual retranslation of the doctrines into the language of advancing knowledge. We shall know that our new phrases cannot be adequate, but we shall hope that they may be more adequate than phrases belonging to an even more rudimentary stage of human knowledge; and we shall expect to find them bringing home the truths enshrined in them with greater force and effect.

But of course the Reality, which the Church progressively apprehends, is now as it was in the beginning, and as it ever shall be:

> It fortifies my soul to know
> That, though I perish, Truth is so;
> That, howsoe'er I stray or range,
> Whate'er I do, Thou dost not change;
> I steadier step when I recall,
> That, if I slip, Thou dost not fall.

What then is this one Reality? and how is it made known to men? and what is the faith which persists unchanging through altering expressions of belief? "In Him was Life"—not mere aliveness but vital energy—"and the Life was the light of men." "Faith is confidence in what is hoped for, a testing of things not seen." Christ answered no speculative question, but He gave men power to live as He lived—the power or right to become sons of God—if they put their trust in Him. And in response we make an act, not of intellectual submission, but of self-devotion and dedication of purpose, being confident that what we hope is true (though we can have no *a priori* certainty) and testing the unseen forces alike in thought and action. This faith is one in all the ages, though in its outward form at various times it is as different as the oak is different from the acorn which is its earlier self. This vital energy given by God and received by Man in the Person of Him Who is both God and Man—this is the eternal in the midst of time.

And the Church is the Fellowship of all who thus devote themselves or earnestly try to do so. It is one with a unity that no schism can break; our divisions are indeed unhappy and a sad source of weakness, but through them all the Church remains one. However multiform its organization, however various in degree of adequacy its interpretation of the one Lord, still in its allegiance to the historic Jesus Christ as God and Man it is one with a unity not made by man but by Christ Himself when in utter loneliness He bore the Cross for all mankind.

Now the point of view which I am suggesting

seems to me full of hope for the Church's missionary work. I have no authority to speak on such a theme, but I am sure that if I were called to be a Missionary, I should desire abundant liberty of retranslating the experience formulated in the Catholic tradition into language more intelligible to the children of another civilization, and I should hope to learn from my converts' way of responding to the revelation of God in Christ so much new truth as might require some change in my own formulation of belief. I should be glad to say to a nascent native Church—while myself maintaining the truth as I had received and tested it—"'Read of, ponder on, pray to the Lord Jesus Christ,'* and receive His Sacramental Presence through the means He has appointed, and as you do this all else will become plain to you according to your needs and circumstances."

And we in the Church of England have a peculiar responsibility. Whatever the historical explanation of the fact may be, fact it is that we unite in one ecclesiastical organization representatives of almost all possible types of Christianity. Lately we have all been learning to appreciate one another in new ways, and consequently have been learning much from each other—as also from those outside our own body. Here is an opportunity, such as is not to be found elsewhere in the world, of bringing into being that Evangelical Catholicism which is the only possible basis for a reunited Church. We should give heed to the Bishop of Oxford's warning, and be careful (if truth permit) never to state our own view in such a way as to make others feel that fellowship with us is im-

* Archbishop Temple. *The Relations between Religion and Science*, closing words.

possible. We must endure the lack of immediate force which comes from the lack of definiteness in our doctrinal position. For there seems to be one work to which we are peculiarly called—the work of mediation between different groups of Christ's disciples, and of generating the new synthesis upon which all may at last combine.

But while we seek patience for our time of waiting, and while we strive to speak the truth in unfeigned love, let us pray the more earnestly for that full outward unity of the Church which is the indispensable condition of its conquest of the world. While we contradict one another in the name of Christ the world is either bewildered or indifferent. The testimony of a united Church would be almost irresistible. But union must not be reached either through compromise or through retrogressive movement to the position in which we were united long ago. I even believe that our divisions have been permitted precisely in order that, in the stir of thought to which they give occasion, we may find at last a fuller truth than was known to the primitive or to the mediæval Church, and that reunited on that higher level we may win a yet more glorious victory for Christ. And as we pray for that full unity in trust and action, let us be guided by the most sacred words in all the world—the prayer which was Christ's own prelude to His redemptive act of sacrifice, as that prayer lingered in the memory and imagination of His dearest friend: "I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to Thee. Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given Me, that they may be one as We are . . . . As Thou hast sent Me into the world, even so have I sent them into the world . . . . Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall

believe on Me through their word ; that they all may be one ; as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us : that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me."

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